

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH URGES VIRGINIANS TO MAKE THEIR HOMES AND NEIGHBORHOODS SAFER AND HEALTHIER

(RICHMOND, Va.)—Are your home and neighborhood safe places for your children? Can they ride their bikes safely in the neighborhood? Are their playgrounds designed to reduce injury? Do you have smoke alarms in your home? Is your child exposed to lead or lead-based paint? These and other questions form the theme of this year's National Public Health Week, April 3-9, which focuses on how our homes, streets and neighborhoods affect the health and safety of children.

According to the Virginia Department of Health's (VDH) Division for Injury and Violence Prevention, more children and adolescents die from injury than from all other causes combined. Unintentional injuries are preventable through environmental modifications, changing behavior and widespread use of safety devices. VDH offers the following advice on how to make your home and neighborhood safety zones for your children.

FIRE SAFETY

Children under age 5 are more than twice as likely to die in a fire as the average resident. Cooking equipment and smoking are the leading cause of death in home fires. VDH's Get Alarmed, Virginia program works with local fire departments to provide fire safety instruction and install smoke detectors in high-risk homes. Since the program began in 1998, it has saved more than 80 men, women and children in Virginia. More information about the program and fire safety tips is available online at www.vahealth.org/civp/fire/getalarmedva.asp.

LEAD POISONING

An estimated 13,800 children in Virginia have elevated levels of lead in their blood. This can interfere with normal brain development and can lead to permanently reduced IQ, learning disabilities and behavioral disorders. The primary source of lead is dust from lead-based paint often found in many of Virginia's 1.8 million homes built before 1978, when the use of lead-based paint was banned. Lead poisoning is a greater risk for children under age 6 because their brains are still developing. Also, children this age are more likely to put their hands and other objects in their mouths and spend more time crawling on the floor where they can pick up dust containing lead. Factors that put children at risk for lead poisoning include living in a house or apartment built before 1978 and renovated within the past six months, having a sibling or friend with lead poisoning, living with an adult whose job or hobby involves exposure to lead, living in a high-risk ZIP code and living near a lead smelter or battery recycling plant. Children under age 6 who are exposed to these risks should be tested for lead, even if they seem healthy. Make an appointment with your child's health care provider for a lead test at age 1 and again at age 2. For more information on how to protect children from lead poisoning, and to determine if you live in a high-risk zip code, visit www.vahealth.org/leadsafe/.

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BICYCLE SAFETY

Bicycles are associated with more childhood injuries than any other consumer product except automobiles. Eighty percent of bicycle-related fatalities are due to rider error. Traumatic brain injury is the leading cause of bike-related fatalities. Safe bicycling means learning the rules of the road: ride on the right, use proper hand signals, heed all traffic signs and always wear a helmet, which can reduce bike fatalities by 75 percent. Learn more about bicycle safety by visiting Bike Smart, Virginia at www.vahealth.org/civp/bike/index.asp.

PLAYGROUND SAFETY

Every 2.5 minutes a child in the United States is injured on a playground, mostly from falls. Approximately 200,000 require emergency room treatment. In 2004 in Virginia, 105 playground falls required hospitalizations that resulted in a median cost per episode of \$8,061 and a two-day stay in the hospital. The greatest risks for playground injury occur when equipment is taller than 5 feet, adequate playground surfacing is absent, playgrounds are not well maintained and children are not supervised. The four-step SAFE Playground program provides tips on how to reduce playground injury. For more information on the SAFE Playground program and information on how to evaluate your child's playground, visit www.vahealth.org/civp/topics/playground.asp.

NEIGHBORHOOD AUDIT

One way to help ensure that your neighborhood is safe for your children is to evaluate walking and biking problems using the checklists offered by the National Center for Bicycling and Walking. They enable you to evaluate the sidewalks, streets and traffic in your neighborhood and suggest ways you can work with local planners and elected officials to improve conditions. You can find both checklists by visiting www.bikewalk.org, and selecting "Community Assessment Tools."

EDITORS NOTE: Contact the VDH Regional Public Information Officers (see names at top) to find out how health departments in your area are celebrating National Public Health Week. For more information about keeping Virginia's children safe and healthy, visit www.vdh.virginia.gov.

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